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HAPPENINGS IN AND AROUND THE AUSTIN SPRINGS, TENNESSEE COMMUNITY ALMOST SEVENTY YEARS AGO

(As related to Me by Ola Maupin, Lillie Westmoreland, Maud Vincent and Jack Maupin)

BY MARY BURSELL MAUPIN

The mid-January chill arrived one day in the early 1930s. The doors of the tobacco barns swung wide open. The smoke no longer seeped through the crevices and corners from the smoldering sawdust on the floor. The tobacco had been stripped, graded, packed and loaded onto two wagons to be taken to The Loose Leaf Tobacco Auction Barn in Mayfield, Kentucky. The December rains had brought the tobacco "in order," and all the growers hoped for a good price.

For some, tobacco was their only cash crop, money to buy sugar, flour, coffee and shoes for the family. Sometimes enough was left to buy a piece of dress material for the wife and daughters of the household. Buyers from the East would be there to inspect and buy thirteen months of hard labor, planting fields, chopping, fertilizing and suckering the tobacco in blazing heat and frigid cold. It had been the same process since the western parts of Tennessee and Kentucky were settled.

So it was with John Rhoades, Wes Maupin and Leslie Westmoreland, farming the Austin Springs area of Weakley County, Tennessee. These three and their families were neighbors helping each other. Their income from farming was supplemented by work at the sawmill or snaking and hauling out logs.

Wes Maupin and his family planted ten acres of tobacco each year on the Tom Johnson place, where they lived. Tom, Chap and Clyde Johnson's father owned one of the mercantile stores in

Austin Springs.

The Westmorelands sharecropped the Blaylock farm on the Austin Springs road. John Rhoades lived across the river at Mill Town, where one of the sawmills was located.

The three agreed to meet at the Wiley School and State Line Road at daylight that cold January morning. It would be a twenty-mile trip to the auction barn in Mayfield. About mid-way they would stop at the Lebanon Church to rest, feed and water the mules and take a lunch break.

Their clean flour sack held fried pork, cathead biscuits, fried sweet potatoes and fried pies made from last summer's dried peaches and apples.

From the dust bowl of the mid-west to the soup kitchens of New York, the rest of the country was still in deep depression. However, these families' larders were filled with last summer's canned and dried produce. John, Leslie and Wes ate well on their way to market. Their mules lumbered along at a steady pace to reach the auction barn in Mayfield. They had unloaded the tobacco from their wagons before dark and found a hotel room where they could stay all night.

Early next morning the three were at the auction barn waiting to see who would be buying their tobacco. By noon all of their tobacco had been sold, and Wes and Leslie were hitching their mules to Leslie's empty wagon and starting out for the Court Square. There they could visit with friends and get the latest news from other tobacco farmers. Leslie and Wes parked the team and wagon on the southeast side of the square, where the cold January sun seemed to shine a bit brighter and a little warmer. But John was not with them when they reached the square.

Since he was known to take a drink now and again, Leslie and Wes guessed he had stopped somewhere to dicker for a jug of white lightning from one of the known sellers in the area.

Around two p.m. John showed up, wearing his harness and hames around his shoulders. "Say, fellers, we've made out good today, ain't we? But I got a favor to ask. I jest sold my team, and I desperately need a way home. It would be kindly of one of you if'n I could hitch my wagon to yers."

Well, of course, Wes and Leslie were agreeable. But then John starts whooping and yelling, lines dragging far behind, running at full speed around the Court House Square. When he had played horse all the way to the northwest corner of the square, two deputies met John and told him he was under arrest.

"Whatcha 'restin' me fer, boys?"

"Oh, come on, John. Let's go see the Judge."

In the courthouse that official asked the deputies, "What charges do you bring against this man?"

One of the deputies related how the accused had been playing a runaway horse in harness around the square. In short that John, drunk and disorderly, had been disturbing the peace.

The Judge, having had John in his courtroom before, said in a friendly tone, "Now, John, I'm going to fine you ten dollars this time. But you have to go on home to your family."

Not saying a word, John reached down into his bib overall pocket and pulled out a big wad of bills. He peeled off a twenty and tossed it on the Judge's desk and started for the door.

As John swung through the door with his harness still jingling and hanging from his shoulders, the judge called out,

"John, you forgot your change."

John peeked around the door frame and said, "Oh, that's all right, Judge. You keep it. I may want to run around the square again 'fore I go home."

Later in the afternoon, some residents along the Mayfield road saw a team of mules pulling two wagons, and there was John sitting in the second wagon, still draped in his harness, singing at the top of his lungs.

LIGHT VERSE BY BETTYE MILLS JENKINS

THE DEVIL GOES TO CHURCH WITH ME

The devil goes to church with me. He sits right by my side.
He helps me hold the songbook; he doesn't try to hide.
He makes the coffee perking smell drift by me in the air.
It takes all my strength to keep on sitting there.
He makes the seat get harder and hurt me in the back.
He makes the pains and twinges feel like sitting on a tack.
The preacher's voice is even. It then begins to drone.
And all that I can think is: When will I get home?

When I die and go to heaven and knock at the Pearly Gate,
St. Peter will come and open it just after a little wait.
I'll hold up my attendance card with the golden stars in view.
He'll shake his head and say, "Devil's chance is as good as yours."